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THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

MR. STRACHEY'S OTHER STRING¹

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

MR. LYTTON STRACHEY is the Lucky Fiddler of criticism, for his bow has two strings. As is known to all, he can do biographical criticism to the King's taste, if not to the Queen's (what Victoria would have thought of Mr. Strachey's book about her is a fascinating speculation). It is less generally known that Mr. Strachey is also an accomplished master of that somewhat bedraggled art, literary criticism. This seems hardly fair. Mr. Strachey should have been content with the kind of thing he does so triumphantly in *Eminent Victorians* and in his *Life of the Queen*, without poaching on the preserves of those who write about such dull matters as poetry, plays, and novels. Is Mr. Strachey a member of the Critics' Union? To be sure, he had written an earlier book of criticism, and he has contributed to *The New Quarterly*, *The Edinburgh Review*, *The Athenæum*. Yet we fancy that it will jolt the critical guild to find Mr. Strachey using their tools and loafing around with such easy grace, as if he were entirely at home, in the club-rooms of the Brotherhood. What business (you hear them muttering) has the biographer of Florence Nightingale and Victoria to be writing—and writing with such dangerous ease and competence—about Blake and Shakespeare and Sir Thomas Browne *as artists*, not simply as Characters? It seems, as we said, unfair and monopolistic. Mr. Strachey's possession of a card should be established without delay.

But alas, card or no card, we fear that Mr. Strachey, as a practitioner of literary criticism, has come to stay, no matter how unwelcome he may be to those who cannot but view with some degree of envy his brilliant performance of their own stunts.

¹*Books and Characters.* By Lytton Strachey. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co.

Mr. Strachey, contrasting those poets whose virtue resides in their substance with those other poets who prevail by reason of their style, remarks: "Take away the expression from the *Satires* of Pope, or from *The Excursion*, and, though you will destroy the poems, you will leave behind a great mass of thought. Take away the expression from *Hyperion*, and you will leave nothing at all. To ask which is the better of the two styles is like asking whether a peach is better than a rose, because, both being beautiful, you can eat the one and not the other."

Discussing the tragedies of Racine and the tragedies of Voltaire, he writes: "The technical restrictions [Racine] labored under were incredibly great; his vocabulary was cribbed, his versification was cabined, his whole power of dramatic movement was scrupulously confined; conventional rules of every conceivable denomination hurried out to restrain his genius, with the alacrity of Lilliputians pegging down a Gulliver; wherever he turned he was met by a hiatus or a pitfall, a blind-alley or a *mot bas*. But his triumph was not simply the conquest of these refractory creatures; it was something much more astonishing. It was the creation, in spite of them, nay, by their very aid, of a glowing, living, soaring, and enchanting work of art. To have brought about this amazing combination, to have erected, upon a structure of Alexandrines, of Unities, of Noble Personages, of stilted diction, of the whole intolerable paraphernalia of the Classical stage, an edifice of subtle psychology, of exquisite poetry, of overwhelming passion—that is a *tour de force* whose achievement entitles Jean Racine to a place among the very few consummate artists of the world. Voltaire, unfortunately, was neither a poet nor a psychologist; and, when he took up the mantle of Racine, he put it, not upon a human being, but upon a tailor's block. To change the metaphor, Racine's work resembled one of those elaborate paper transparencies which delighted our grandmothers, illuminated from within so as to present a charming tinted picture with varying degrees of shadow and of light. Voltaire was able to make the transparency, but he never could light the candle; and the only result of his efforts was some sticky pieces of paper, cut into curious shapes, and roughly daubed with color."

Again, he wishes to suggest in a sentence the essence of the Romantic revival ("that marvelous hour in the history of French literature when the tyranny of two centuries was shattered forever"), and he does it thus: "It was the hour of Hugo, Vigny, Musset, Gautier, Balzac, with their new sonorities and golden cadences, their new lyric passion and dramatic stress, their new virtuositities, their new impulse towards the strange and the magnificent, their new desire for diversity and the manifold comprehension of life."

Now, what are you going to do about a professing biographer, a projector of historical characters, who, according to the rules of the game, should stick to Victoria and Manning and Gordon and the rest, yet persists in stealing the literary critic's stuff and putting it to such engaging uses? Obviously, the only wise thing to do is to admit him to the Brotherhood. For not only is it distressingly clear that the interloper can perform the Brotherhood's own tricks, but it is evident that he can teach them some new ones of uncommon merit. He has that priceless faculty in a critic—the faculty of taking an old and much photographed subject and so placing it before the lens as to produce a wholly new set of contours and surfaces and expressions, so that we see the long-familiar face, the well-known turn of the neck and pose of the body, in a fresh and engrossing light. He glances at our old friend Hamlet, for example, and begins to speak of the tragedy of that much-examined soul. Perhaps you expect to have Mr. Strachey ring the changes on Hamlet's wavering will? You are in for a pleasant disappointment. "Hamlet's tragedy," he remarks (as casually as if he were re-stating a critical platitude), "was the tragedy of an over-powerful will—a will so strong as to recoil upon itself, and fall into indecision. It is easy for a weak man to be decided . . . ; but a strong man, who can do anything, sometimes leaves everything undone."

Shakespearean sharks like Dr. Lawrence Mason may think that Mr. Strachey's theory as to the state of mind in which the divine William conceived the plays of his final period is a bit over-simplified, and perhaps it is. But it is at least plausible, and it makes mighty interesting reading—so interesting that we cannot resist exhibiting some of it. When Shakespeare wrote *Cymbeline* and

The Winter's Tale, he was getting bored—"bored with people, bored with real life, bored with drama, bored, in fact, with everything except poetry and poetical dreams. He is no longer interested, one often feels, in what happens, or who says what, so long as he can find place for a faultless lyric, or a new, unimagined rhythmical effect, or a grand and mystic speech. . . . Is it not thus, then, that we should imagine him in the last years of his life? Half enchanted by visions of beauty and loveliness, and half bored to death; on the one side inspired by a soaring fancy to the singing of ethereal songs, and on the other urged by a general disgust to burst occasionally through his torpor into bitter and violent speech? If we are to learn anything of his mind from his last works, it is surely this." And then Mr. Strachey proceeds to take Shakespeare to task for having achieved in *The Tempest* a work in which "unreality has reached its apotheosis" (he has just been pointing out that in all the plays of the final period, "we are no longer in the real world, but in a world of enchantment, of mystery, of wonder, . . . a world in which anything may happen next"). He is unhappy over this aspect of *The Tempest*: "Two of the principal characters are frankly not human beings at all; and the whole action passes, through a series of impossible occurrences, in a place which can only by courtesy be said to exist." This strikes us as a bit thick, unless we are too dull to understand why Mr. Strachey should be dissatisfied with *The Tempest* because of its "unreality". Surely he is no first cousin to the celebrated British matron who objected to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* because they were "so improbable"? Mr. Strachey cannot be in *that* galley. We read on, and find that what Mr. Strachey really objects to in *The Tempest* is that it differs from the romance and magic of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in that its supernatural beings are not "full of life". The persons that haunt that wood near Athens—elves no less than lords and ladies and mechanics—"are full of life": "substantial creatures, whose loves and jokes and quarrels receive our thorough sympathy. . . . To turn from Theseus and Titania and Bottom to the Enchanted Island, is to step out of a country lane into a conservatory. The roses and the dandelions have vanished before preposterous cactuses

and fascinating orchids too delicate for the open air." Is one mistaken in thinking that Mr. Strachey in this vivacious passage is just a bit less perceptive, less delicately comprehending, less intuitive, than one has a right to expect him to be? Is he quite fair to himself when he grumbles at Ariel's "insubstantiality"? He refers somewhere in this essay to his "irreverent eye"; but here we are confronting not "irreverence" but what an unfriendly critic of Mr. Strachey (if conceivably there be any such) might rudely call obtuseness.

The Shakespeare study was written sixteen years ago, when Mr. Strachey, like the rest of us, was younger than he is now; and his essay on *The Poetry of William Blake*, dating from the same year, has something of the same relative immaturity. What strikes one at the outset is that the diction is a good deal less artfully felicitous than that of the mature, contemporary Strachey. We do not think that Mr. Strachey to-day—the Strachey who knows so many of the secrets of beautiful and musical prose—would use in the same line the words "singularly" and "single". Nor is it easy to imagine the Strachey of to-day writing these stiff and perfunctory phrases—

. . . his compositions, amenable to no other laws than those of his own making, fill a unique place in the poetry of the world.

. . . worthy of the great university under whose auspices it has been produced, and of the great artist whose words it will help to perpetuate.

. . . welcomed by every lover of English poetry.

And it is in this essay that Mr. Strachey attains what is, for him, the almost incredible quality of stupidity. He attains it when he permits himself to object to mysticism because of what he calls "its lack of humanity". "The mystic ideal," he observes, "is the highest of all; but it has no breadth." Of that, there are so many things to say that one gives up in dismay. We leave Mr. Strachey to the tender mercies of Miss Evelyn Underhill and the embattled ghosts of Shankara, Emerson, and Walt Whitman. You cannot help wondering what Mr. Strachey thinks a "mystic" is, and whether he would be greatly surprised to learn that Jesus of Nazareth was one.

Yet turn to almost any page in this delectable collection, and how easily you forgive Mr. Strachey for his occasional obtuse-

ness! After all, what critic—even the most brilliant and acute—has not disclosed blind spots and rioted with perverse joy in astonishing miscomprehensions? Remember the obtuseness of Matthew Arnold about Shelley, of Schumann about Wagner, of Swinburne about Euripides, of Lowell about Whitman, of Sainte-Beuve about Stendhal (a case which Mr. Strachey himself recalls), of Pater about Rossetti—who was praised by the ineffable Walter for his lesser virtues and ignored for his transcendent ones. So who will not gladly forgive Mr. Strachey for his nonsense about mysticism and his myopic view of *The Tempest* when his many triumphs of interpretation and disclosure are happily brought to mind?

You will remember, perhaps, the swift vividness with which he sets forth the difference between the magic allusiveness of Shakespeare and the simple directness of Racine: “When Shakespeare [he says] wishes to describe a silent night he does so with a single stroke of detail—

. . . not a mouse stirring . . .

“Racine’s way is different, but is it less masterly?

Mais tout dort, et l’armée, et les vents, et Neptune.

“What a flat and feeble set of expressions! is the Englishman’s first thought—with the conventional ‘Neptune’, and the vague ‘armée’, and the commonplace ‘vents’. And he forgets to notice the total impression which these words produce—the atmosphere of darkness and emptiness and vastness and ominous hush.”

Is that not admirable as a piece of critical indication? And here is his description of the method by which Shakespeare paints the minds of men diffused, not sharpened, by emotion: “As passion rises, expression becomes more and more poetical and vague. Image flows into image, thought into thought, until at last the state of mind is revealed, inform and molten, driving darkly through a vast storm of words.” And his picture of the imaginative terrain of Racine is not easily forgotten: “The world of his creation is not a copy of our own; it is a heightened and rarefied extension of it; moving, in triumph and in beauty, through ‘an ampler ether, a diviner air’. It is a world where

the hesitations and the pettinesses and the squalors of this earth have been fired out ¹; a world where ugliness is a forgotten name, and lust itself has grown ethereal; where anguish has become a grace and death a glory, and love the beginning and the end of all."

Some will excite themselves with argument over the relative importance of Mr. Strachey the critic of letters and Mr. Strachey the critic of character. Perhaps the passage that we have just quoted may help to suggest the relative value of the two Stracheys. Mr. Strachey as a discoverer and appreciator of æsthetic qualities is beguiling and sensitive and distinguished, and he writes with point, with wit, with beauty. He is clairvoyant, eloquent, delightful, when he writes of poets and prose-men. But Mr. Strachey the biographical dramatizer is azygous in the true sense of the word. It is not difficult to think of other men who could have written as well as he has written of Racine, of Stendhal, of Sir Thomas Browne. But who else under the canopy could have produced the consummate essay on Madame du Deffand in *Books and Characters*, or the sly and delicious study of Voltaire and Frederick the Great, or that dazzling piece of biographical bravura, *Lady Hester Stanhope*? Here Mr. Strachey is a sovereign of undisputed sway; here he is without rival: a master of masters. Where in the literature of biographical narrative would you turn to find the equal of the superb passage with which Mr. Strachey brings to an end his study of Lady Hester?—

"She ran into debt, and was swindled by the money-lenders; her steward cheated her, her servants pilfered her; her distress was at last acute. She fell into fits of terrible depression, bursting into dreadful tears and savage cries. Her habits grew more and more eccentric. She lay in bed all day, and sat up all night, talking unceasingly for hour upon hour to Dr. Meryon, who alone of her English attendants remained with her, Mrs. Fry having withdrawn to more congenial scenes long since. The doctor was a poor-spirited and muddled-headed man, but he was a good listener; and there he sat while that extraordinary talk flowed

¹ Mr. Strachey was writing *Britannic English*, not *American English*, and so of course did not suspect that his "fired out" might be a little disconcerting to the American reader of his exalted paragraph.

on—talk that scaled the heavens and ransacked the earth, talk in which memories of an abolished past—stories of Mr. Pitt and of George III, vituperations against Mr. Canning, mimeries of the Duchess of Devonshire—mingled phantasmagorically with doctrines of Fate and planetary influence, and speculations on the Arabian origin of the Scottish clans, and lamentations over the wickedness of servants; till the unaccountable figure, with its robes and its long pipe, loomed through the tobacco-smoke like some vision of a Sibyl in a dream. She might be robbed and ruined, her house might crumble over her head; but she talked on. She grew ill and desperate; yet still she talked. Did she feel that the time was coming when she could talk no more? . . .

“She lived for nearly a year after he [Dr. Meryon] left her—we know no more. She had vowed never to pass through the gate of her house; but did she sometimes totter to her garden—that beautiful garden which she had created, with its roses and its fountains, its alleys and its bowers—and look westward at the sea? The end came in June, 1839. Her servants immediately possessed themselves of every movable object in the house. But Lady Hester cared no longer: she was lying back in her bed—inexplicable, grand, preposterous, with her nose in the air.”

You recognize, of course, that this is the mother-ship of certain of those sly and devastating submarines of character that were afterward to flash through the shining waters of *Queen Victoria* (the essay on Lady Hester is dated 1919). But what if Mr. Strachey does pull the same stuff more than once? No one else could do it; and it is marvelous stuff.

LAWRENCE GILMAN.